

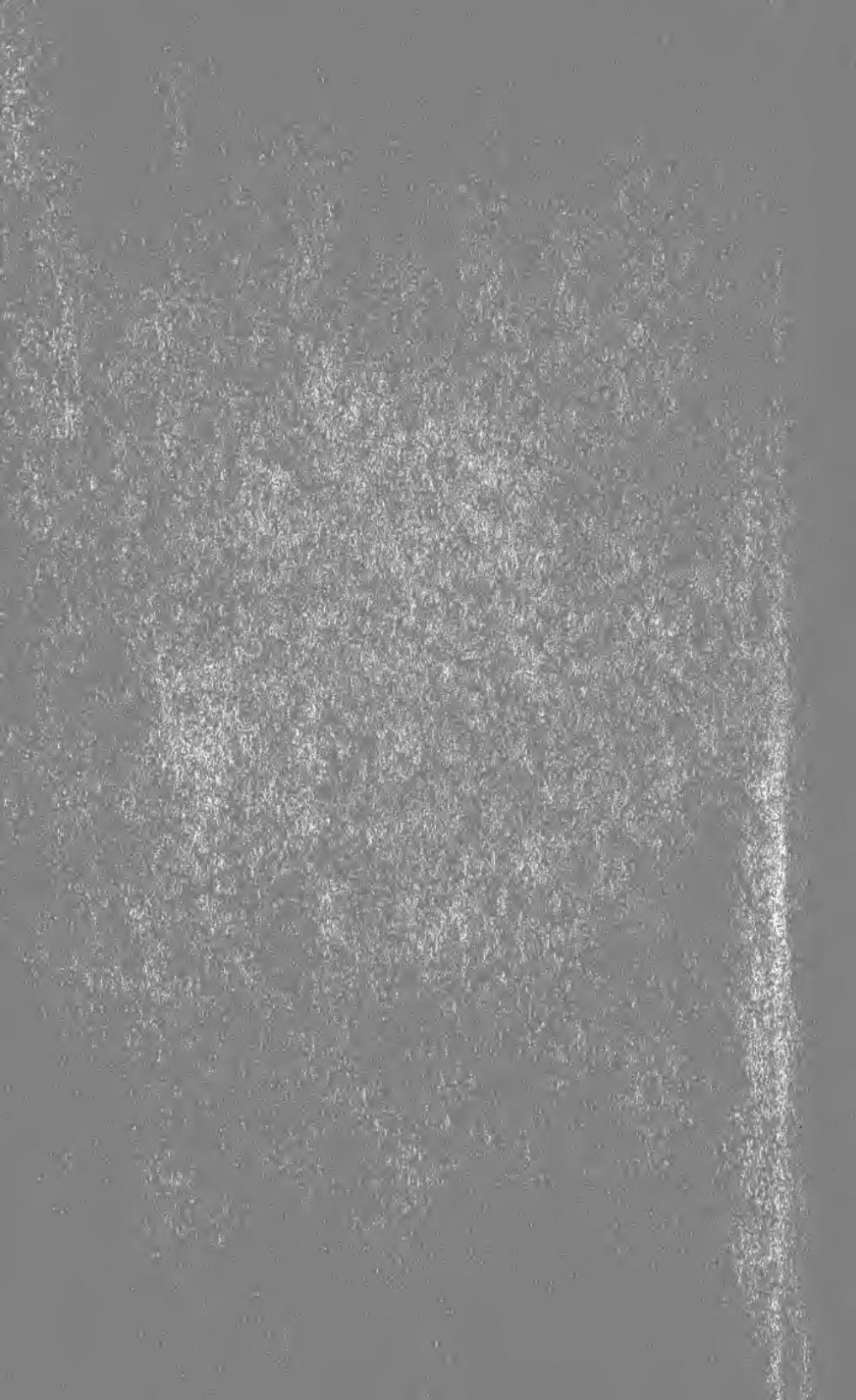
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THE
STRICT AND NORMAL HUMANITY
OF
J E S U S.

BY REV. JOSEPH MAY.



AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION,

BOSTON.

“The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity ; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose.” — ARTICLE I. *of the By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

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THE STRICT AND NORMAL HUMANITY OF JESUS.

The New Testament, *passim*, "CHRIST."

HERE is one of the most impressive syllables that human ears have heard.

Whether in its various phases of significance, in its history as an influence in the world at large, as a spring of comfort and consolation in the private mind of men, or as furnishing a moral and spiritual ideal, the Christ conception has been one of the most remarkable our race has cherished, — perhaps the most remarkable.

That it has been, on the whole, dignified, gracious, beautiful, pure, elevating, no heart could possibly question. That it has even contained and preserved a great truth, an inspiring thought, we must also freely and gratefully admit.

No sensitive mind can contemplate this conception without emotion, without reverence. Whatever be our thoughtful conclusions in regard to it, the subject is to be treated with deepest respect and sympathy, and with the utmost tenderness and delicacy.

But it is obviously one to be studied with a care and thoroughness which shall not only be candid and considerate, but which ought to be rigidly critical. Here, as everywhere, the truth is the one precious thing. We can make in the brief time of a sermon but a most cursory examination of the questions presented by the Christ idea, but some of the main points may be indicated.

The word “Christ” is a direct transcription from the Greek, without change of form except the dropping of a terminal syllable. The Greek was “Christos,” which in Latin became “Christus.” Its significance is perfectly clear. It was from a verb meaning “to anoint;” so it means “anointed,” “an anointed one.” In its religious sense the idea is strictly Hebrew; and the Greek term is, in its turn, only a translation of a Hebrew one. This latter was, as expressed in English, “Messiah.” It never¹ appears in the Old Testament as a technical term, but is always used in its general significance. Any person might be spoken of as “anointed,” “an anointed one;” but of course the term was used of but few. These were especially the high priests² and the kings;³ rarely, but perhaps occasionally, prophets.⁴

In the earlier references,—as in the Books of Exodus, Leviticus, Samuel, Kings,—the actual mode of consecration to a sacred office, by pouring on consecrated oil, was clearly in view. In this literal sense, no doubt, David, mourning for his valiant captain, Abner, cries out, “I am this day weak, though anointed king” (2 Sam. iii. 39). But, as thus used by the hero king, we see how readily it would pass over to a metaphorical sense, with a more profound suggestiveness. In this sense it was applied to the whole nation of Israel, as chosen and set apart by Yahweh to be his peculiar people, the recipient of especial grace and favor from him. Thus we read in Psalm lxxxiv. 9, “Behold, O God, our shield, and look upon the face of thine anointed;” in Psalm lxxxix. 38, “Thou hast been wroth with thine anointed;” and in Habakkuk (iii. 13), “Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, for the salvation of thine anointed.”

¹ Dan. ix. 25 and 26 are corrected in our Revised Version to read “the anointed one.”

² As Aaron and his sons (Ex. xxx. 22-33; Lev. iv. 3).

³ 1 Sam. x. 1, xvi. 13.

⁴ Ps. cv. 15.

In this metaphorical sense the term was also applied to any individual upon whom the spirit of Yahweh seemed to have descended to lay on him a commission. Thus Isaiah (lxii. 1) cries, in the beautiful words which Jesus aptly quoted to describe his own mission, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings to the meek." The same prophet (or rather the "great unknown" who two centuries later composed the latter portion of the book which stands under the name of Isaiah) applies the term, metaphorically, to Cyrus, king of Persia, who released the Jews from their bondage in Babylon when he conquered that mighty city (Isa. xlvi. 1).

But of course this term was applied to, and at length became the technical title of, that great deliverer to whom in its final decadence the nation looked so eagerly forward. This personage was not distinctly conceived in the period which produced the books, even the latest ones, of the Old Testament; and so, as I have said, the term, "the Messiah," does not appear there in a technical sense. As a high authority says, the Old Testament furnishes, not a fixed doctrine of the Messiah, but the material from which in subsequent times such a doctrine might be drawn.¹ In a word, the idea of the personal Messiah is, as he expresses it, "post-canonical" with reference to the Old Testament. But the "material" was, in a measure, there in the ancient writings, although less abundantly than is commonly supposed. First as the idealized nation, "servant" and "son" of Yahweh; then, more clearly, as a Davidic king of power and glory, who should be raised up and commissioned by Yahweh to restore and aggrandize the nation, and make it master of all others, the conception was shaping itself which in the latest days of discomfiture and despair came to possess the weary hearts of

¹ W. Robertson Smith, Encyclopædia Britannica, article, "Messiah."

Yahweh's people with the vision of a personal Messiah. Buffeted by every nation, oppressed even by his own native princes, Israel lost faith in help of man, and fixed his anxious gaze on the vague but awful features of a deliverer, human, indeed, in nature, but exalted to super-human dignity, and endowed by Yahweh with his divine commission, and with his power to conquer, to restore, and to rule. In this final, specialized form of the conception the Messiah became the longing of the people, toward which the patriotic hearts of Judah strained with an intensity of which in Christian times the hope of the second advent of Jesus is a reflection, but only a feeble one. All the Messiah's characteristics became the object of minute curiosity and inquiry. The scribes identified each peculiarity of his person and circumstance of his coming. His lineage must needs be that of their royal hero, David. His birthplace was determined from the ancient Scriptures. Day by day, night by night, as their actual fortunes darkened, earnest souls among the Jews watched and waited, intent to suffering, I dare say, for Messiah's approach.

Especially, of course, would this expectation stir and swell when any popular uprising against their oppressors stimulated the national consciousness, and begat a brief hope of independence.

Pretenders there were naturally,—“false Christs,”—false, or half true in their own thought, misled by their own dreams, and for a time misleading others. Doubtless every man who promised to be a leader of the people was critically scanned for signs of his realizing the Messianic dream; and on the existence of such signs in him his chief hold upon the people would depend.

The development of the Messianic idea was thus a long process, at which I can now scarcely more than hint. Its final shaping into the expectation of a particular personage was, I would have you see, later than has usually

been supposed or assumed.¹ Our chief testimony to the nature and intensity of the expectation is the New Testament. It may well be (as some of our best modern authorities hold) that much there found is a reflection back upon those times from a later period in which the belief in Jesus as the Messiah had fully established itself among his followers, from whom the New Testament documents come down to us.² But it seems to me that enough remains to justify, on the whole, the common view, and to show that the expectation of the Messiah was very general and very intense and alert in the last century of the Jewish State.

It was in just this period that Jesus of Nazareth was born, grew up, and fulfilled his mission.

According to what I have said, we may well believe that, in such a time of unrest and portent and expectation, any individual who felt in himself the stir of great powers, of eager purposes, who seemed to hear a divine call within his soul summoning him to prophethood and leadership among his people, could hardly escape or decline the — at least tentative — application to himself of the Messianic hope. It was to be a commission laid upon some one of the sons of men ; it might be he as well as another. Piety, as much as ambition, would suggest it to his thoughts.

Hence that story in the sixteenth chapter of Matthew of Jesus's confidential inquiry of his disciples whom the people thought him to be, with Simon Peter's confident answer that he believed him to be the Messiah, while, on the whole, I think it probably a myth, is doubtless (as a genuine myth always is) a fairly just illustration of the

¹ The technical title "Messiah" first occurs, in fact, in the so-called "Psalter of Solomon;" a work which appeared soon after the taking of Jerusalem by Pompey, or about the middle of the century preceding our era.

² Kuenen's "Religion of Israel," chap. xii. ; Carpenter's "Synoptic Gospels."

actual facts of the time. It presents Jesus in a light too unspiritual to make it easily credible of him, in its form ; yet the question of his realizing in his own person the Messiah idea might naturally — it must almost inevitably — have arisen within his consecrated mind.

Nor need this thought have been unworthy of a man like Jesus. The profounder his sense of his consecration to the people's regeneration, the more exalted his interpretation of his mission, so much the more earnestly must any son of Israel have scanned the supposed prophecies to assure himself whether or not they testified of him that he had the might and purpose of Yahweh behind him in his efforts.

We must not so idealize Jesus as to dehumanize him and deprive him of naturalness in the workings of his mind. That is not to exalt him, but merely to make him unreal, which belittles him, and impairs his influence and effectiveness. The myth of the Temptation is almost precious as an illustration of and warning against a tendency which is not truly reverent, but is unsound. Jesus's true elevation consists (like that of every noble man) in this : that, while he could feel all the motives of a normal human mind and heart, he characteristically accepted only the highest, only the spiritual ones. This statement is, I think, literally correct, and of historical validity ; and it commands from us unlimited admiration and reverence. The text is scarcely, in my judgment, an exaggeration, — “ He was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin.” I can believe it, because I do not think the fact so wholly exceptional as we are apt to assume in the lives of God's children. There may be, and has been, utter moral fidelity without the exceptional intellectual and spiritual endowments which mark this Master among men.

Certainly we may say of Jesus that there is no trace of a disposition to self-aggrandizement in his biography,

although the record has come to us from, and has passed through, so many and such inferior hands. If he studied his own soul, or even the outward facts of his origin and person, for their testimony to his Messiahship, it was visibly in the spirit of a most pure consecration. And if he accepted the nation's hope as realized in his case, it was to eliminate from the conception all that was mundane, and to give it a moral and spiritual interpretation such as the most exalted prophecy had scarcely hinted, and such as the national consciousness could only, as it did, reject.

But, whether Jesus did or did not apply to himself the Messianic hope, it was, as I have intimated, all but inevitable that any who became his followers should apply it to him. Other similar expectations were also current in that excited, credulous age. The Gospels describe John Baptist as refusing to be considered the Messiah, and choosing rather the character of his forerunner, who was expected to be the prophet Elijah returned to earth, as, even in modern times, great characters have been expected to reappear. That the conviction of his Messiahship controlled the minds of Jesus's immediate disciples, of all others who at all associated themselves with him, and for a time of the populace generally, the record plainly exhibits, even in its myths. Of those who, after following him for a while, "walked no more with him," doubtless most withdrew through disappointment at his delay in realizing the Messiah hope, or from a growing doubt that he was the true deliverer. The apostles were continually on the watch, during his life, for his visible assertion of his title to the office. When, at last, all these hopes were crushed by his arrest and crucifixion, they gave up in despair, and forsook him and fled. When the belief in his return to life cheered again their hearts, it revived also their hope in him as Messiah; and the first question they are represented as asking him, on his reported reunion

with them, was, “Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?”¹

Thus in the established notions of his people was laid the foundation of the conception of Jesus as a specially delegated emissary from Deity; and a religious movement which, could it have been kept clear from such influences, would have been a purely spiritual one, was adulterated at its very source with ideas at once mundane, metaphysical, and visionary.

Speculation about Jesus, even in the minds of his very earliest disciples, usurped in large measure the energy of mind and heart which should have gone to understanding and following him as a spiritual leader. Alas, for this latter the time was not ripe! No time has yet been quite ripe for that true discipleship. Our question is whether it is ripe to-day—or we can make it so.

The first generation of Jesus’s disciples, then, all Jews, accepted him as, and accepted him because they believed him to be, the Hebrew Messiah,—a purely imaginary personage and a worldly one.

The conviction which Peter is represented to have expressed² was that of all who accepted him,—“Thou art the Christ.”

The title, as we have seen, was one of specific meaning, and in its first stage implied only that one character,—the Messiah of the Jews.

But the language further ascribed to Peter suggests the first change of significance which the term underwent.

Much time was not given for the endurance of the disciples’ hope in its strict Hebrew interpretation.

Jesus’s career as a public man was but of a few months’, at most of two or three years’, duration. Then, as a crucified malefactor, all hope of his outward delivery of the nation was dispersed.

¹ Acts i. 6.

² Matt. xvi. 16.

But he had taken the deepest hold on his followers' hearts ; and, indeed, bereft, forlorn, there was no other leader to whom they could turn. "Lord, to whom shall we go?" the same Peter's despairing ejaculation, expressed their situation and feelings. Such a necessity as theirs, in such an age, was likely to create the source of its own relief. Traditional notions connected with the Messiahship, fragments of Scripture, mysterious words of his own, came to their help, arousing the expectation that after a brief sojourn in the grave their Master would return to life.

On this hope, at least, the disciples fastened with an avidity which, as I have hinted, could hardly but produce its own satisfaction in the supposed fact of his resurrection. The belief in this event spread like wildfire among the hearts of a credulous community, which without it would have been utterly comfortless.

But, after all, while Jesus was believed to have returned to life, it was only in a phantasmal way. He never resumed his place among men as an effective human leader. The practical result of the resurrection myth was to found firmly the conviction of his continued spiritual leadership, and the new interpretation of the idea and title, "the Christ," as implying a world-wide, supernatural commission from Deity to be the healer and Saviour of the nations.

This conception, however, could hardly have been developed along the lines it actually followed, had the Christian movement continued on Jewish soil, in the hands of Jewish disciples. It was Paul, a Jew by birth and education, yet Greek also in association and culture ; a man who never saw Jesus ; who, except as its opponent, never had more than a very superficial relation to the Jewish-Christian propaganda and its leaders, the original apostles ; whose Christianity was more the creation of his own mind and heart than derived from them,—it was Paul who, more

than all others, gave outline and distinctness to the second conception of the Christ.

Paul fully believed, of course, that Jesus realized in its true sense the Hebrew Messiahship;¹ but as he emancipated Christianity from its national restrictions, and made it an inward, not an outward, matter, so he enlarged and spiritualized the idea of the Messiahship of Jesus, so that its first significance rapidly faded, and settled into a subsidiary place in men's thoughts. Jesus as the Christ was to the second generation of converts (mostly Gentile, as they were) not the mere Hebrew deliverer, but the spiritual mediator sent forth by the universal God to be the Saviour of men, reconciling them to himself.

The title which particularly expresses this secondary meaning of the term "Christ" is the "Son of God." In the metaphysical sense which it soon acquired under the influence of Greek modes of thought, the idea which it suggests is not in sympathy with the spirit of Hebraism. As a technical term the phrase was unfamiliar to the Hebrews of an earlier period; it nowhere occurs in the Old Testament.²

Angels and exceptional men were sometimes called "sons" of God, but only in the general sense of God's children, or metaphorically, to mark their power or goodness;³ the nation was sometimes personified as the son of Yahweh;⁴ but any idea of sonship to God which even seemed to bridge the infinite chasm between humanity and transcendent Deity would have been, and was, a deep impiety to the Hebrews. It was the true ground of the wholly genuine abhorrence of Jesus and the hostility to him on the part of the priests and people, and was the essence of their charge against him at his trial, that he had professed

¹ Acts xiii. 23, *et seq.*

² A single text (Dan. iii. 35) in our English Bible has been amended in the Revised Version so as to remove it.

³ Gen. vi. 2; Job i. 6, ii. 1.

⁴ Ex. iv. 22; Hosea xi. 1.

to be the Son of God, and had by calling God his Father arrogated to himself some sort of equality with the Deity, who to the Hebrews at all periods was so utterly exalted above all other beings as to have no generic relation to any.

Yet, as I have said, Hebraism had admitted a metaphorical fatherhood in Deity; and Jesus had actually made this fatherhood literal and real in his exquisite representations of God. Probably, indeed, the idea had germinated among the more spiritual of his predecessors. The title, "Son of God," while it is said to be nowhere found in pre-Christian literature, would appear, from Paul's familiar use of it, to have been current in the Jewish schools as a designation of the Messiah. In some such manner, at any rate, the way had been prepared for that belief in Jesus as in a special and exalted sense "the Son" of God which appears throughout the Gospels,—perhaps tentatively more often than positively,—which rapidly developed after his death, and which the title "Christ," the anointed one, henceforth peculiarly suggested.¹

This double conception of Jesus as the Hebrew Messiah and the Son of God occupied and inspired the mind of Paul. The progress of his thought, by which the metaphysical idea of the Son replaced in emphasis the popular notion of the Messiah, appears pretty plainly in his Epistles.² Jesus, as its illustration and cynosure, must

¹ From the tenor of the first three Gospels it would appear almost certain that Jesus did not apply to himself the title "Son of God," although not refusing it when applied to him by others. He preferred the title "Son of man," which is, however, strictly Messianic, and was, no doubt, chosen by him for that reason.

The Fourth Gospel cannot confidently be cited on any biographical point, not merely for its late and unknown origin, but because it is written with a purpose to which all its facts are made to conform. It is properly a tract designed to show that Jesus was the Son of God and the Logos. It is, of course, highly valuable to illustrate a certain stage and mode of Christian belief.

² See E. H. Hall's "Orthodoxy and Heresy," p. 24, *et seq.*

take on an expanded dignity corresponding to that enlarged view of the nature and mission of Christianity which Paul originated and propagated. The apostle's view rapidly developed to the idea of a being, still human in nature, and certainly never in the least confused with Deity, but idealized and exalted to the highest conceivable plane of quality and function, and whom indwelling God-head filled to the utmost measure of his capacity. Rabbinical lore and Gnostic metaphysics united to engage a mind constitutionally lacking in poetic imaginativeness, yet, as such minds often are, none the less prone to them, in speculations which now seem crude and vain, but of which no language was too high-strained to express the outcome. In his sublimest passages Paul continually and emphatically refers to Jesus as man,¹ yet as Christ he is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature." He is the agent in creation: "In him were all things created that are in the heavens and upon the earth." He was pre-existent: "He is before all things, and in him all things consist."² The scheme of doctrine at which Paul arrived was summed up in his Epistle to the Galatians (iv. 4): "When the fulness of the time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law that he might redeem them which were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons;" and in that to Timothy (1 Tim. ii. 5): "There is one God, one mediator also between God and men, himself man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all."³

As Christianity spread among pagans and Hellenistic Jews, it encountered, moreover, another metaphysical

¹ 1 Cor. xv. 21; Rom. v. 15; Acts xvii. 31; 1 Cor. xv. 47 (Revised Version).

² Col. i. 15-17.

³ So highly Gnostic is much that is ascribed to Paul in some of these passages as to cause some of the Epistles which bear his name to be disputed, especially Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians.

conception, which had for centuries, and over a wide-spread area, a marvellous vogue. This idea was that of the "Logos," — an emanation going forth from Deity, as his agent and vicar in the world of men and things, to which a reality almost separate and personal was at length ascribed. The first verse of the Fourth Gospel describes this Logos, or "Word," of God; and how the conception became associated with the person of Jesus as the Christ that Gospel vividly illustrates. Misleading as it has been in respect to the real Jesus, the Fourth Gospel is thus of the highest value as illustrating this progress and development of a remarkable metaphysical conception.

I can only now briefly repeat what I have formerly shown here more at large, — that it was through the identification of the Christ-idea with the Logos-idea that the doctrine of Christ was recommended to the Greek world, and its character and form definitely fixed.

Henceforth, although it took centuries before the amazing result was fully reached, the steps were direct and sure to the ultimate identification of Christ with Deity in that audacious speculation of theology, the doctrine of the Trinity.

From the idea of a man especially endowed and commissioned by God for a particular divine purpose, to that of a man glorified and exalted to the highest conceivable plane of being; thence to that of an emanation from Deity far above manhood yet below Godhead; finally to identification with Deity in an unthinkable confusion of persons, — these are the steps which the Christ idea has travelled.

Once such a train of wild and weird speculations was started, loosened from all hold of reality, there was no logical point at which it could be stopped short of the extreme which it actually reached.¹

¹ It took, however, almost four centuries to reach the final result. After many vicissitudes, through debates often violent and accompanied by physi-

There is a providence in all history,—social, mental, moral; and doubtless things could not have been other than they have been. The fine spiritual thought of Jesus, his exalted character, fell into the custody of men often of noble aims and purposes, but limited by the mental conditions of their time, possessed by its theories, prone to abstruse speculations in which the energies of minds, unchecked by natural science and sound mental philosophy, ran riot. The same men were weighted by tradition, and urged by that spirit of dogmatism which a mistaken view of the nature and office of religious truth sustains to-day.

It may be that, had not the person and thought of Jesus been seized upon by these tendencies of his age and that which followed it, and in their clouded amber been imperfectly preserved, they must have been lost to us altogether, or have survived only in a vague tradition or in still more imperfect remains than those which now we possess. It is difficult to draw his complete portrait from relics so scanty and fragmentary, and which have been so moulded by the ideas of others, as those which the Gospels present to us. This cannot be done dogmatically. It is a task which each disciple must finally perform for himself.

Happily, however, Jesus was too great a man to be readily hidden, even by the vast clouds of speculation which gathered so rapidly and thickly about his personality. On the relics which we have, the essential traits of his character, the elements of his thought, his fundamental

cal collisions of the disputants, through no little practice of the arts of the politician and the caucus, the doctrine of the deity of Christ was affirmed at the Council of Nice, in A. D. 325. The co-equality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son was affirmed at the Council of Constantinople, in A. D. 381. The Trinity finally received its full doctrinal statement in the so-called Creed of Athanasius, the origin of which is obscure, but which was not known to the Greek Church before A. D. 1000, nor to the Latin Church before A. D. 800. (Its doctrinal elements, however, were familiar some centuries earlier.)

principles of conduct, are ineffaceably stamped. For the practical purposes of spiritual edification and moral incitement his image is not insufficiently clear; and it is of all the treasures of the moral world the choicest. As thought grows clearer with the advance of intellectual development, as science extends its trustworthy researches, as philosophy grows surer, as the moral standard rises, we are actually able to re-create him more surely, simply because the world is advancing a little nearer to the plane upon which he moved.

In those metaphysical and mystical speculations about Jesus which have resulted in the standard creeds of Christendom, and which have moulded the character of its discipleship; in the dogmas which have impaired his simple humanity, and have deformed, not elevated, his personality in the vain effort to magnify him; imposing and sometimes gracious and beautiful as the figments they present sometimes appear, I believe there is no reality, no truth, and so no spiritual life, no moral re-enforcement. I believe that, while they were probably (as I have suggested) inevitable in such a world as this, and in such periods as those in which they grew up; while (as the worthless "gangue" surrounds the precious ore, defending what it hides) they may have done some service in preserving the knowledge of Jesus through ages too gross to understand him as he was; in themselves they have been aside from and alien to the real and spiritual truth embodied in the nature, character, and life of Jesus, and offered in his religious and moral teachings. They have been unspiritual, melodramatic attempts to give factitious grandeur to verities, the real dignity of which lay all the while in their simplicity; travesties of the actual divine order in its relation to humanity; essentially childish, however grandiose the terms in which they have been presented and the stage on which the drama of theology has been conducted.

They have, therefore, turned men's thought, faith, and effort away from the truth. They have repressed the true spiritual ardor, exciting false and unreal enthusiasms in sincere, aspiring hearts. They have deadened the normal religious hunger which only the true spiritual meat can satisfy. They have hidden the real man Jesus from the world, and have diverted men from the only true discipleship, — that discipleship which should take up the same cross of spiritual endeavor, of moral self-purification, of brotherly loving service, which made the threefold structure of his holy life. Metaphysical belief about him lamentably took the place of the true and practical following of Jesus.

This long, long road, my friends, has all to be traced back ! The Christian world is beginning to trace it back. The hold of miracle, of the so-called supernatural, of the metaphysical and mystical, is visibly loosening among all the sects. In the vast Roman Catholic communion this is chiefly and unhappily shown by the loss of all care for religion among great masses of the people of Europe, and these the most intelligent, who, when the alternative is presented which that authoritative organization alone offers them, dogma or nothing, answer, " Then nothing." To the educated class in modern Europe the Catholic theology is what the popular religion was to the same class in the later ancient Rome, — a fable.

In the great Protestant world similar phenomena are patent, both in Europe and America. Agnosticism, suspense of faith, indifferentism, mental unrest, abound. A very great portion of the population have utterly deserted the Church in Protestant Europe and in America. At the same time (and this is one great hope for religion and the religious life of the people) orthodox theologians are beginning to unclose their eyes to the light that is now abundantly pouring in upon their domain from natural science,

Biblical science, history, and philosophy. They are beginning to attack with earnestness and ability the problems which eighteen hundred years have indeed made complicated for them. Though as yet they go mincingly, clinging to as much as possible of their creeds, orthodox scholars are actually coming to the same views of the Scriptures at which the most unfettered students have arrived. Two eminent divines have but just now been on trial for such heresies, and, if not victorious in their struggles, have certainly with them the sympathy of a large and influential section of their denomination. You know well how many private minds are quietly rejecting the modes of faith in which they have been brought up. Our friends in the orthodox churches are apt to be offended and hurt if we suggest to them that they and their preachers hold some of the cardinal points in the doctrinal systems which stand unmodified in their Confessions and Articles of Belief, and for which, while they remain there, the practical supporters of those churches are certainly morally responsible.

These are but beginnings, I know; but they are the beginnings of a process which, like the other, cannot stop until the extreme result is reached, any more than the snows of winter can remain unmelted before the coming spring. The alternative has always been, "Reason or Rome;" the authority of a church, a book, a creed, or that of the private soul. The whole path, I repeat, is to be travelled back. The whole intricate skein is to be unravelled.

What will be the result?

It will be rational religion; the religion of nature and reason; the only religion which is sound, which is secure, which has in it the elements of truth, which is the spring of life; the religion of reflection, of experience, of observation, of life; the religion to which men come by natural

and genuine processes of heart and mind ; the religion which harmonizes with whatever else we learn of our nature and our life by rational methods, by the normal use of our faculties, — this religion as contrasted with all schemes whatever which profess to rest upon the affirmations of men of bygone generations, upon any kind of asserted authoritative revelation from God to any soul but that of each several child of His stretching upward to Him for light and life.

It will be, therefore, spiritual religion as contrasted with that intellectual and formal religion which the world has had so long ; for only a religion which is of the spirit can finally satisfy the spirit.

This process at which I hint can have in respect to Jesus but one result, namely, to restore him to the category of normal humanity, unqualified, unconfused ; the highest category of being save only that which is the same, as he taught, in kind, only infinite in degree, — that is, Deity. All other conceptions of his nature are unreal, fanciful, unsuggestive, unfruitful. They will all drop away as the enlightened modern mind expands and asserts itself in theology as it has done in every other department of science. The essential triviality of all that has been added to the majesty of true manhood in Jesus will more and more clearly appear. Their false sanctity will fall from notions made sacred by association, gentle, sweet, dainty, but wanting in virility, and which, under the guise of the supernatural, have really only been unnatural, and so untrue and impossible.

Thus, in place of the mystical Christ, we shall be led back to the commanding but gracious presence of the man Jesus, who has indeed been hidden from the eyes of most Christian men since the day when his body was laid in the new sepulchre of Joseph of Arimathea.

My friends, in the work of the restoration of the true

image of Jesus, so long encrusted with speculation and superstition, it has been the peculiar privilege of the religious body which you and I represent humbly to share. Its mission has, indeed, only by degrees revealed itself to the Unitarian communion. Our earlier predecessors retained, of course, much of the mystical belief about Jesus which has been current in the Christian Church. Two strands only of the cord which had bound Christian thought the early Unitarians ventured to unloose. They untied the bond of authority, and vindicated the right of every man to his own honest judgment and opinion. This they did tentatively and hesitatingly for a time, yet with increasing boldness and fidelity, and at length fully.

Their other service was in detaching from the coils of dogma in which the person of Jesus was involved the conception of his Deity.

Unitarian Christianity a hundred years ago, even fifty years ago, was still Scriptural and still supernaturalistic. Its Christ was a sublimated phantasm, exquisite, perhaps, but having the reality and substantiality neither of Deity nor humanity. It had its structure of miracle and its hesitating theories of inspiration and salvation. It was a half-way house, and had the comfort and security of neither terminus.

But the last half-century has brought us into the open light of day. Let God be praised that a process often so injurious has been so largely accomplished without the loss of faith in the realities of the spiritual world, of reverence for truth, of tenderness for all true sanctities ! But it is plain that, as a body, we now stand for perfect freedom of thought, for the naturalness of religion, and, in the particular of which I have been speaking, for the strict and normal humanity of Jesus.

On us, then, at this moment, especially rests the duty of presenting this imposing figure, freed from childish

trappings of mystery, in the dignity of that spiritual childship to God which is the generic inheritance of all men, to the waiting world.

The responsibility is weighty, but it is gracious ; and the task is now most hopeful. Let us accept it without hesitation. Let us be courageous and explicit ; for our commission is merely that of resuming the actual work of Jesus, which was to convince men in theory, and to lead them to feel it and make it true in fact, that humanity and Deity are in substance one, — that we are the children of God, and He is our Father.

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